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UNCLAS ZAGREB 000528

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: CROATIA'S FOOD SAFETY REGIME: ILLEGAL
BOVINE IMMIGRATION

REF: A) ZAGREB 221 B) ZAGREB 251

1) SUMMARY: Croatia's food safety regime came under intense media scrutiny after the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) scare in Croatia in February 2006 (ref B). Additionally, there was much speculation about unregulated trade in livestock. The GOC cited the false positive for BSE as proof that their food safety system works, but conceded that the BSE scare also revealed that the suspected cow had been purchased on the black market. Econoffs met with Croatian officials to discuss the GOC's food safety regime and in March 2006, the U.S. Food Safety Inspection Service (FSIS) completed a regular audit of the Croatian meat inspection system. Overall, Croatia's food safety regime seems robust, although FSIS expressed concern over some reoccurring sanitation problems. The Ministry of Agriculture is preparing a corrective action plan to address FSIS's concerns. END SUMMARY

2) Head of the transmissible spongiform encephalopathies department of the Croatian veterinary institute, Branko Sostaric, said that Croatia has tested about 74,000 cows (those older than 30 months, dead animals, those exhibiting symptoms of neurological disease, or by request) since 2001 and that a false positive for BSE can be expected in a sample size that large. Sostaric said that the recent BSE scare was a useful experience that accelerated actions already planned by the Ministry of Agriculture, such as hiring 50 more veterinary inspectors in high-risk areas for black market cattle and closing some of the smaller slaughterhouses.

3) In response to allegations that a black market in livestock was operating in Croatia, Assistant Agricultural Minister Stjepan Mikolcic said that illegal trade in livestock was the result of a change from one regulatory system to another, and was not an endemic problem. Oscar Meuffels, the Dutch agricultural counselor, discounted the GOC's claim that illegal trade in livestock was not a problem, noting that Assistant Minister for the Veterinary Department in the Ministry of Agriculture, Mate Brstilo, said in a television interview that the black market "only" accounted for 10% of trade. When asked about the government's investigation into possible illegal trade, Bozica Rukavina, Head of Food Safety and Quality at the Ministry of Agriculture, said that, to her knowledge, the GOC had thoroughly investigated the matter, taken action and did not believe this was an ongoing problem.

4) Slavko Cvetnic, Secretary General of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Art and retired professor of veterinary medicine, noted that most of the small slaughterhouses in Croatia are located in Split county near the coast and not in Slavonia, Croatia's large agricultural area. Cvetnic said that cattle are brought across the border with Bosnia and Herzegovina and then slaughtered in small slaughterhouses (there are over 200 slaughterhouses total in Croatia) to satisfy increased demand for beef during peak tourist season. Cvetnic and Ministry of Agriculture officials said that the process of bringing Croatian slaughterhouses in-line with EU standards will result in the closure of many, which will help curb unregulated trade.

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